

[Great Lakes Folklore]

[?]

Accession no.

W 3658

Date received

10/10/40

Consignment no.

1

Shipped from

Wash. Office

Label

Amount

8p [?]

WPA L. C. PROJECT Writers' UNIT

Folklore Collection (or Type)

Title Great lakes folklore

Place of origin Chicago, Illinois Date 4/5/39

Library of Congress

Project worker Jerome W. Power

Project editor

Remarks W3658

Forms to be Filled out for Each Interview

CHICAGO FOLKSTUFF

FORM A Circumstances of Interview Great Lakes Lore

FOLKLORE

CHICAGO

No. Words 1340

May 26 [1939?]

STATE Illinois

NAME OF WORKER Jerome W. Power

ADDRESS 708 West 76th Street

DATE April 5, 1939

SUBJECT Great Lakes Folklore

1. Date and time of interview -

April 5, 1939 - 1:30 P. M.

Library of Congress

2. Place of interview -

N. M. U. headquarters, 92nd Street & Baltimore Avenue

3. Name and address of informant -

S. J. Premo

4. Name and address of person, if any, who put you in touch with informant. -

Ralph Rogers, General Organizer, National Maritime Union, 92nd St. & Baltimore, Ave., Chicago, Ill.

5. Name and address of person, if any, accompanying you

None

6. Description of room, house, surroundings, etc.-

Union Headquarters. Large second floor hall. About a dozen sailors present, sitting at tables or standing in small groups, talking. Radio going. This is in South Chicago, one of the main ports on the Great Lakes.

FORM B Personal History of Informant

CHICAGO FOLKSTUFF

FOLKLORE

CHICAGO

No. Words

Library of Congress

STATE Illinois

NAME OF WORKER Jerome W. Power

ADDRESS 708 West 76th Street

DATE April 5, 1939

SUBJECT Great Lakes Folklore

NAME OF INFORMANT S. J. Premo

1. Ancestry - French

2. Place and date of birth -

Marinette, Wisconsin, February 2, 1900

3. Family - Same

4. Places lived in, with dates -

Marinette, (Boyhood); Lake Boats, 1917; New York(Deep Water Sailor) 1917-1924; Great Lakes Boats 1924 to date.

5. Education, with dates -

Grammar School

6. Occupations and accomplishments, with dates -

Sailor; Machinist; 1917 to date.

7. Special skills and interests -

Library of Congress

Maritime

8. Community and religious activities -

Catholic

9. Description of informant-

A small man 39 years old, appearance neat, sociable, well mannered and intelligent. Speaks good English with no accent or dialect.

10. Other Points gained in interview -

Difficult to get informant to discuss small incidents of daily life on boats; he seemed to think wrecks, collisions and such only subjects worth while.

1

No. Words

1,500

FORM C Text -1-

CHICAGO FOLKSTUFF

When I became 17 years old I got a little tired of Marinette, Wisconsin, my home town. So I went to Norfolk, Virginia and joined my brother, Clifford, who was a salt water sailor. We both got berths on the "Saxola", a coal barge. In February, 1917, with two other barges, all towed by a tug in a string, we left this port bound for Philadelphia with a consignment of coal. Outside the Delaware Breakwater we were hit by a sudden gale, about 75 miles per hour, I should say. This, of course, is a pretty stiff wind. The barges had sails up, to help the tug and before we could reef them they had frozen. We dropped anchors in 25 fathoms

Library of Congress

of water, but the hull of the barge right in the rear of the Saxola got fouled with the anchor chain and bobbing up and down in the high seas must have sawed a deep cut across her bottom. Whatever it was, she suddenly began to sink. My brother grabbed an ax and cut the hauser attached to our stern. The barge then foundered in a few minutes and we were in luck that the "Saxola" was not pulled to the bottom with her, as would have been the case had my brother not chopped the hauser.

In 1917, just after the United States entered the World War, I shipped on the "Omsk", a Russian freighter loaded with cotton, from Baltimore to Liverpool. She was 12,000 tons and a pretty good boat. In Baltimore her entire crew had deserted, having turned bolsheviks at the time of the upheaval in their country. Only 2 four Russians remained aboard - the captain, first officer, second officer and third assistant engineer. They were all part owners of the boat. Arrangements were made with the authorities so that the "Omsk" left Baltimore with an American captain and crew, the Russians sailing more or less as passengers. We proceeded up the coast to Halifax, N. S., our first stop. Here, just a few days before our arrival some German agent had touched off a ship loaded with T. N. T. while she awaited clearance papers. The explosion had made a mess of the harbor. Boats as big as 150 tons had been hurled clear out of the water up on the rocky shores. Many were killed. We set out across the Atlantic under convoy of destroyers and while several periscopes were sighted we did not get a torpedo, reaching Liverpool in safety. Sinking of the Cedric

I wished to return to the United States early in 1917, when I was in Liverpool after completing an outward voyage in the "Omsk", loaded with cotton for the Allies. This was not so easy. American consuls will go far to help a big corporation of some sort, but they seem to regard American sailors as nuisances. I finally made arrangements to return on the "Adriatic", a passenger boat, I had to pay my fare. We left Liverpool with three other passenger boats protected by a convoy of destroyers. When we had been under way three days, between 3 and 4 o'clock in the afternoon, I was on deck shooting craps with some other sailors when the alarm sounded, telling us that periscopes 3 had been sighted.

Library of Congress

No crap game in the history of the world ever broke up with more speed. We dropped a number of depth bombs, or “ash cans”, as they were called, from the “Adriatic” and hoped for the best. The destroyers rushed around like mad, seeking periscopes to shoot at. I stood at the rail, looking at the “Cedric”, one of our sister ships about half a mile away, when a column of white water suddenly shot up near her bow. In a few seconds I heard a dull boom, not very loud, but giving the impression of terrific force let loose. A second torpedo struck her amidships and the two of them must have torn her tottom out, for she sank is less than twenty minutes, going down by the head and at the last throwing her after part high into the air. Six hundred, if I remember, were lost on the “Cedric”. Only an ordinary sea was running, but half a dozen subs were around the spot and rescue attempts were not very successful on that account. The destroyers got one of the subs, or perhaps it was one of our depth charges. The bow of the sub shot high out of the water not very far from us and then she went down like a rock, leaving an oil slick all over the sea. It happened so quickly that aboard the “Adriatic” we did not even have time to get into our life preservers, but everybody was calm. We had proceeded only about a mile from the spot when the subs appeared again. One of them came to the surface, probably by mistake, not far from a destroyer and got a solid shot through her conning tower. She sank at once. We kept a very sharp look-out at dawn and sunset after that, for these times were the worst for subs. We reached 4 New York Harbor without further adventures. Jonah Ships

Jonah ships are on the Great Lakes, and bad as many seamen need jobs, it is hard to get a crew to work some of these. All the sailors know the Jonahs, and hate them like the devil hates holy water. Jonah ships are born unlucky, like certain people and they have trouble as long as they stay on top of the water. It is not a case of structural defects. Some of these Jonahs have trim lines and good speed records They are just unlucky, I guess.

Women and Cats

A good skipper, in the old days of sail on the salt water, would not allow a woman to set foot aboard his craft. This was not a matter of morality, at all. Women were considered

Library of Congress

unlucky. Their presence aboard put a curse on the ship. Cats were also considered bad luck and were seldom allowed aboard. On the Great Lakes, in these modern days of steam, this old superstition does not prevail. The chief steward on a lake boat often gets his wife to sign on as second cook. The sailors consider her bad luck only if she is a bad cook. Cats are welcome as mascots, too, the same as dogs, goats, snakes and such other animals as take the fancy of members of the crew. The End of the Colgate

Young captains on lake boats are often driven into bad errors by the greed of owners who demand that they make fast time under all 5 circumstances. The captain is on the spot. For errors of judgment in navigation he may lose his captain's license, but if he is too cautious he may lose his job. The end of the "Colgate", a "pig" or "whaleback" as they are called, illustrate this point. She set out from Buffalo in 1917 loaded with coal. Near Long Point in Lake Erie she struck heavy weather and took refuge behind a headland. She should have waited out the blow, as did about fifteen other ships on the same spot, but the captain, who was green, began to fret about the loss of time and put out from his refuge, right in the teeth of the gale. His ship was heavily loaded and not entirely seaworthy. The waves pounded her full of leaks and she sank before she was out of sight of the headland. Free Liquor!

During prohibition I sailed on a private yacht belonging to a Chicago manufacturer. He was considered a tight proposition, so that when he announced one day, soon after we had left Detroit, that he was throwing open his liquor closet to the crew and for everybody to help himself, we could not believe our ears. We thought he had gone crazy. Just the same, we didn't argue, but made a rush for the liquor closet and cleaned out the stock in a hurry, so that not so much as a half pint of whiskey was left in the place. He was particular about this. "Take everything, boys! Don't leave a thing - not even a smell of liquor!" We never obeyed an order with more joy. The liquor, which consisted of whiskey, rum, brandy, gin and everything else which was scarce in those days, went into the bunks of the sailors - all except a case of good shiskey which was seized by one Andy McNab, a Scotch A. B. He tucked the bottles into a partially reefed top-sail and then reefed her tight. Bunks, he said,

Library of Congress

were not safe places. Everybody got as drunk as possible, although the officers insisted that enough men remain sober to operate the ship. When we reached Chicago the whole crew was pinched for violation of the prohibition laws. You see, somebody had sent a wireless tip to the owner and that old fox, knowing that his liquor would be seized anyhow as soon as he reached Chicago, figured that he could dodge trouble with the authorities and at the same time be a good fellow to the crew of his ship for once in his life. We were all held for a couple hours while the yacht was searched. They found the booze in the bunks, of course, and decided that it was just as case of a bunch of sailors with too much money being reckless with Canadian liquor. The fact that we were all more or less drunk was in our favor, since it indicated that we wanted the stuff for our own purposes and not to sell. When they questioned the owner he played innocent and said that sailors would be sailors. Everything turned out well, although some of the crew actually shed tears over the liquor which was confiscated by the feds. In the bunk of Andy MacNab, of course, nothing was found, which the feds would have thought strange, if they had known Andy like we did. When we were out of sight of land once more willing hands helped Andy to unreef the top-sail and the unconfiscated case of whiskey brought cheer again to all hands.